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New survey results give a window into teen behavior and risks

Survey includes information on alcohol, tobacco, and drug use

OLYMPIA — A new survey of Washington students shows most are making good choices about their health. Still, far too many regularly use alcohol, tobacco, drugs, and engage in risky behavior.

The Healthy Youth Survey focuses on health risk behaviors. The anonymous voluntary survey is taken every two years by more than 210,000 public school kids around the state in grades six, eight, 10, and 12. It covers many topics young people face — drug, alcohol, and tobacco use; weapons in schools; gangs; gambling; physical activity; suicide; bullying; and more.

“This survey is a snapshot of what’s going on with youth in our state,” said Secretary of Health Mary Selecky. “We’re working hard to help kids make the right choices for their health. When they develop healthy habits early in life it provides an excellent foundation as they become adults.”

Overall, drug use, alcohol use, tobacco use, and obesity rates haven’t changed much since the last survey in 2006. Still, there’s cause for concern. Almost one in five 10th-graders reported having five or more drinks in a row at least once in the past two weeks. About one in 10 students in 10th and 12th grades say they used a prescription painkiller to get high.

“Because their brains are still developing, kids who use alcohol and other drugs are at much greater risk for addiction and other problems than adults,” said Stan Marshburn, interim secretary of the state Department of Social and Health Services. “It’s important for parents to set clear rules, talk with their children starting in elementary school, and keep at it through their teens.” Parents can get [proven tips on how to talk with their kids](http://www.StartTalkingNow.org) (www.StartTalkingNow.org) online.

Students who use drugs and alcohol often don’t do well in school and are more likely to disengage or even drop out. “The results clearly show that negative influences in school hurt grades,” said Randy Dorn, state superintendent of public instruction. Depression affects how kids do in class — those feeling depressed were more likely to get Cs, Ds, and Fs than kids who weren’t depressed.

There’s some good news about diet. The percent of kids in grades 10 and 12 who reported drinking two or more sodas a day dropped from about 20 percent in 2006 to around 15 percent in 2008.

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Drinking other sweetened beverages at school also decreased. School policies limiting sales of sodas and other sweetened beverages may have contributed to this improvement as fewer 10th and 12th-graders reported buying these beverages at school.

The dramatic reductions in teen smoking have leveled off in recent years. Just over 14 percent of 10th-graders report they've smoked a cigarette at least once in the past 30 days. That's about the same as two years ago. The survey results also show that among youth who use tobacco, most use multiple types — such as flavored cigarettes, cigars, or chew — along with cigarettes. Since the Department of Health began its Tobacco Prevention and Control Program in 2000, overall smoking rates among youth have dropped by about half.

Some specific findings of the survey include:

- Among 8th-graders, 41 percent who drink alcohol say they get it from home, and about 24 percent say their parents haven't talked with them about alcohol and its risks.
- Seven percent of 8th and 10th-graders gambled at least once a month in the past year.
- Fewer students in grades 6, 8, and 12 say they enjoy being at school than in 2006. About one in five 8th-graders report skipping school in the past month.
- About 8 percent of 8th and 10th-graders have been a member of a gang during the past year.
- Among 6th-graders who sometimes feel sad or hopeless, about one in four say they do not have or are not sure if they have an adult in their life to talk to when they feel sad.
- About 9 percent of 10th-graders report they tried to commit suicide in the past year, which is a similar rate to recent years.
- Only about 70 percent of 10th-graders say they always wear a seat belt — similar to 2006.

Survey results are used to plan, implement, and evaluate youth programs around the state. The survey is a joint effort of the Department of Health, Department of Social and Health Services, Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, Liquor Control Board, the Family Policy Council, and the Department of Community, Trade, and Economic Development. The [Healthy Youth Survey](http://www.doh.wa.gov/Topics/healthy_youth_2008) (www.doh.wa.gov/Topics/healthy_youth_2008) and fact sheets with more information are online.

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